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The Mantle of Earth

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The purpose of this paper is to identify a theme which occurs with some frequency as a decoration on early Byzantine tapestry weaves from Egypt, but which has not hitherto been recognized in the literature on these textiles. This theme is nothing less than the portrayal of the terrestrial world, the representation of the entire earth and ocean together with their bounty. It is a subject which was displayed on Near Eastern textiles as early as the first century A.D. and which continued to be shown after the fall of Egypt to the Arabs in the seventh century. In many of the textiles, the weavers reduced the vastness of terrestrial creation to a design not more than a few inches across, compressing the fruitfulness of all nature to the confines of a motif which could be repeated several times on a hanging or a garment, like the reiteration of a charm.

In A.D. 39 Queen Kypros, the wife of Herodes Agrippa the King of Judaea, sent a textile to the Emperor Gaius, together with these lines by the poet Philip:

γαῖαν τὴν φερέκαρπον ὅσῃν ἔζωκε περίχθων
ὠκεανὸς μεγάλῳ Καίσαρι πειθομένην
καὶ γλαυκὴν με θάλασσαν ἀπηκριβώσατο Κύπρος
κερκίσιν ἰστοπόνοις πάντ' ἀπομαξαμένη·
Καίσαρι δ' εὐξείνῳι χάρις ἦλθομεν, ἣν γὰρ ἀνάσσης
δῶρα φέρειν τὰ θεοῖς καὶ πρὶν ὀφειλόμενα.¹

This gift, "a perfect copy of the harvest-bearing earth, all that the land-encircling ocean girdles . . . and the grey sea too," must have rendered pictorially a common concept of Roman cosmography, the notion that the

¹ *Anthologia Palatina*, IX. 778; edition and translation by A. S. F. Gow and D. L. Page, *The Greek Anthology: The Garland of Philip* (Cambridge 1968), I, p. 300 and II, pp. 333 ff.

inhabited earth was surrounded, like an island, by a continuous sea.² The idea was expressed in Greek literature as early as Homer's description of the shield of Achilles,³ and was set out by Strabo in his *Geography* shortly before the weaving of the textile.⁴ Eventually it was taken over by Early Christian and early Byzantine writers, such as Eusebius and Cosmas Indicopleustes.⁵ The notion of the sea-encircled earth was also depicted in early Byzantine works of art, of which the most well-known is the mosaic in the north transept of the basilica of Dumetios in Nikopolis, which was laid in the second quarter of the sixth century (Fig. 1).⁶ Here a border depicting varied creatures and plants of the waters surrounds a square central panel portraying birds, trees, and flowers which signify the life of the earth; the mosaic is accompanied by the following inscription:

Ὁκεανὸν περίφαντον ἀπίριτον ἔνθα δέδορκα
γαῖαν μέσσον ἔχοντα σοφοῖς ἰνδάλμασι τέχνης
πάντα περίξ φορέουσιν ὅσα πνίει τε καὶ ἔρπει,
Δουμετίου κτέανον μεγαθύμου ἀρχιερέως.⁷

While this inscription speaks of the "famous and boundless ocean containing in its midst the earth," it may be noted that the border surrounding the central panel of the mosaic contains fresh water life as well as sea creatures: in this ocean we find not only fish, octopuses and shellfish, but also lotus plants and ducks.⁸

The textile sent by Queen Kypros no longer survives; indeed, no textiles illustrating the earth and the ocean have come down to us from the time of the early Empire. There are, however, a number of textiles with this subject extant from the early Byzantine period; one of these textiles is well known, but the others are hitherto either unpublished or unidentified.

² See E. Kitzinger, "Studies on Late Antique and Early Byzantine Floor Mosaics I. Mosaics at Nikopolis," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, VI (1951), 83-122, esp. 103.

³ *Iliad*, XVIII. 607.

⁴ *Geographica*, I. 1. 8.

⁵ Eusebius, *De laudibus Constantini*, 6. 6; Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographia christiana*, 3. 25 and 4. 7.

⁶ Kitzinger, "Studies on Late Antique and Early Byzantine Floor Mosaics"; *idem*, "Mosaic Pavements in the Greek East and the Question of a «Renaissance» under Justinian," *Actes du VI^e Congrès International d'Études Byzantines*, II, 209-23, esp. 214 ff. (reprinted in *idem*, *The Art of Byzantium and the Medieval West: Selected Studies*, ed. W. E. Kleinbauer [Bloomington 1976], pp. 49-63).

⁷ Kitzinger, "Studies on Late Antique and Early Byzantine Floor Mosaics," 100.

⁸ The same phenomenon may be noted in other early Byzantine floor mosaics which depict the earth surrounded by the waters. See, for example, the cosmographic floor of the narthex of the Large Basilica at Heraklea Lynkestis, where the encircling border of aquatic motifs includes ducks, geese, swans and lotus plants: G. Cvetković-Tomašević, *Heraclea*, III, *Mosaic Pavement in the Narthex of the Large Basilica at Heraclea Lynkestis* (Bitola 1967); *idem*, "Mosaïques paléochrétiennes récemment découvertes à Héracléa Lynkestis," *La mosaïque gréco-romaine* (Paris 1975), II, pp. 385-99, figs. 183-92.

The known piece is a silk of the sixth or seventh century which was found in the coffin of St. Cuthbert at the Cathedral of Durham.⁹ Although the silk is in a fragmentary condition, its decoration can be reconstructed (Fig. 2). It was woven with repeated medallions, each enclosing the frontal figure of a woman shown half length, richly dressed with a heavily jeweled necklace or collar, and holding between her hands a scarf which makes a crescent shaped fold filled with fruits. This figure may be identified as a personification of Earth, by analogy with other works of art in which this personification is identified by an inscription. In the center of the sixth-century mosaic floor of the church of the Priest John at Khirbat al-Makhāyyat in Jordan, for example, there is a portrayal of a woman labelled as "TH"; she wears a richly adorned headdress and holds before her a crescent shaped fold of cloth brimming with fruits (Fig. 3).¹⁰ In the Byzantine silk, the personification of Earth rises from a series of parallel lines in the lower third of the roundel which represent water. In these waves six fish and four ducks can be seen swimming; they are arranged symmetrically on either side of the central axis of the medallion, either facing toward the personification or away from her. The circular frame of the medallion is filled with various fruits, such as grapes, figs, and pomegranates. The textile, then, was adorned with repeated portrayals of Earth with her fruits, rising up from the midst of the ocean with its creatures. As in the mosaic at Nikopolis, the ocean is here signified by ducks as well as fish.

In addition to the silk at Durham, there are other, previously unrecognized, textiles which portray Earth in the midst of Ocean. Of these, the most explicit with respect to iconography is a fragment from Egypt in the Field Museum of Chicago (Fig. 4).¹¹ In its present state it comprises a square ornament in wool tapestry weave on a plain linen ground. The ornamental panel measures about eleven inches in height and ten in width; not enough of the piece is preserved to show whether the ornament was repeated, or what the function of the original textile was. It is possible that the panel decorated a garment such as a tunic, but it could also have been part of a cover or hanging.

The decoration of the panel consists of two squares enclosing two circles. In the innermost circle there is the bust of a woman, portrayed frontally. She is richly dressed, with a crown, pendant earrings, a necklace or band around her neck, and a jeweled collar. Behind her head is a yellow halo. The outer circle, which surrounds this figure, is filled with water creatures and plants: fish, dolphins, ducks and lotus plants. The four

⁹ J. F. Flanagan, "The Figured Silks," in *The Relics of Saint Cuthbert*, ed. C. F. Battiscombe (Oxford 1956), pp. 484-525, esp. pp. 505 ff., fig. 1.

¹⁰ S. J. Saller and B. Bagatti, *The town of Nebo (Khirbet El-Mekhāyyat)* (Jerusalem 1949), pp. 38-39, 49-55, fig. 4, pls. 8-13; M. Piccirillo, *I mosaici di Giordania dal I al VIII secolo D.C.* (Rome 1982), p. 17.

¹¹ Museum accession number 173888. The textile is unpublished.

spandrels between the outer circle and the inner square are filled by irregularly shaped motifs which can no longer be read. In the outer square there are stylized rinceaux of leaves.

There can be little doubt that the subject of this panel is the personification of Earth surrounded by the ocean. Her rich attire matches the portrayal of Γῆ on the Durham silk (Fig. 2). The surrounding border of sea creatures corresponds to the border of the Nikopolis mosaic, with its fish, ducks and lotus plants (Fig. 1).

Another textile depicting a personification of Earth surrounded by sea creatures is preserved in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (Fig. 5).¹² The composition, in wool tapestry weave on linen, is circular; in a central medallion it displays the frontal bust of a woman wearing earrings and holding before her a scarf filled with fruits. This central motif is enclosed by a larger circle containing four stylized plants growing from vases. The whole is framed by an outer circle which creates a border filled with fish. In their forms the four plants are similar to those depicted in the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem; they may suggest a late seventh or early eighth-century date for this piece.¹³

To the panels in Chicago and Boston we can add a third Egyptian textile portraying Earth arising out of the ocean, which is now preserved at the Cleveland Museum of Art (Fig. 6).¹⁴ In this case we can see that the motif was repeated several times on the same piece of cloth. The textile, which is about ten inches square, comprises a square ornament (*segmentum*) which is framed on two sides by an L-shaped strip (*gammadion*), both being in tapestry weave in wool and linen. The motif in the central square is the bust of a woman who is richly dressed in a jeweled crown, pendant earrings, and a jeweled necklace or collar around her neck. Her head is framed by a large yellow halo, and the whole figure is set against a dark blue background. The bust is supported below by a pair of ducks with red and white bodies and green necks. The birds face each other in symmetrical poses, with their heads turning away over their backs.

The same motif, of the richly dressed female bust supported on a pair of ducks, is repeated on a smaller scale five times in the *gammadion*. The woman may be identified as Earth on account of her rich costume, and because she rises above a pair of symmetrically confronted ducks, like the personification of Γῆ on the silk at Durham (Fig. 2). As in the silk, the birds in the Cleveland textile serve as signs of the waters that surround the earth.

¹² Museum accession number 07.266. The textile is unpublished; entire dimensions are seven by seven inches.

¹³ Compare, especially, the plants illustrated in plates 13–22 of K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture* (2nd ed., Oxford 1969), I, 1.

¹⁴ Museum accession number 73.21; "The Year in Review for 1973," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 61 (1974), 78, no. 166.

The manner in which the *gammadion* frames the *segmentum* on the Cleveland textile makes it possible that this fragment came from a piece of clothing, such as the lower border of a tunic.¹⁵ The adoption of Earth as a motif for the decoration of clothing would echo a common comparison found in both classical and Early Christian writers: either the earth itself was viewed as a cloak, on account of its shape, or it was seen to be "clothed" with the mantle of its vegetation. Strabo, for example, compared the inhabited world to the form of a *chlamys*, since he believed that its upper or northern portions were more contracted, whereas its southern regions were more spread out.¹⁶ Eusebius wrote of the Creator who "clothes the previously shapeless eternity with beautiful colors and fresh flowers."¹⁷ Basil the Great described the earth at the Creation "moved to produce fruits, as if she had cast away from her some somber garment of mourning, to put on another more brilliant [robe], adorned with the ornaments which are proper to her, and presenting the countless species of her plants."¹⁸ The textile in Cleveland, therefore, could be seen as the realization of a metaphor.

In each of the textiles discussed above, the personification of earth was accompanied by creatures signifying the waters or the sea. On the textiles that will now be examined, however, Earth appeared on her own. We may take as our first example another piece from the collection in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, on which Earth appears as a nimbed bust in a medallion, holding a very stylized scarf filled with fruits (Fig. 7; compare Fig. 5). The medallion containing the bust is enclosed in a narrow strip of tapestry weave decorated with heart-shaped plants, the forms of which suggest a date after the Islamic conquest.¹⁹

A fifth Egyptian textile which probably depicts a personification of Earth is found in the collection of the Louvre (Fig. 8).²⁰ It is a rectangle in tapestry weave, measuring about ten by nine inches, and displaying at its

¹⁵ Compare, for example, a completely preserved tunic such as number 71.48 in the Textile Museum of Washington, D.C.; J. Trilling, *The Roman Heritage, Textiles from Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean 300 to 600 A.D.* (*The Textile Museum Journal*, 21 [Washington, D.C. 1982], 92, no. 103).

¹⁶ *Geographica*, II. 5. 6.

¹⁷ ὁ δ' αὐτὸς χρώμασιν ὠραίοις καὶ νεαροῖς ἄνθεσι τὸν πρὶν ἀσχημάτιστον ἀμφιεννύς αἰδῶνα, *De laudibus Constantini*, 6. 6.

¹⁸ πρὸς καρπογονίαν συγκινουμένην, ὥσπερ τινὰ σκυθρωπὴν καὶ πενθήρη ἀπορρίψασαν περιβολὴν, μεταμφιεννυμένην τὴν παιδροτέραν καὶ τοῖς οἰκείοις κόσμοις ἀγαλλομένην, καὶ τὰ μυρία γένη τῶν φυομένων προβάλλουσιν. *Hexaëmeron*, 5. 2.

¹⁹ Museum Accession Number 01.5896. The textile is unpublished. The woman's halo is flanked by two letters: "C," or perhaps a Coptic gamma, on the left and "E" on the right. It is possible that the inscription was originally intended to read "ΓΗ." The dimensions of this piece are four and a quarter by eleven inches.

²⁰ Inventory number X4736; P. du Bourguet, *Catalogue des étoffes coptes du Musée du Louvre* (Paris 1964), I, p. 197, no. E31.

center the frontal bust of a woman wearing a jeweled diadem, earrings, and collar. She is enclosed by a circle strewn with flower buds. The circle is in turn inscribed within a square, leaving four spandrels between the circle and the square which are filled by green birds. In the frame around the square there are eight medallions containing either birds or flowers; the medallions alternate with eight boys who hold out birds or vases of fruit as offerings. The theme of a richly dressed Earth receiving offerings can be paralleled on floor mosaics such as the floor of the church of the Priest John at Khirbat al-Makhāyyat, where boys with extended arms offer baskets filled with fruits to the central bust of Γῆ (Fig. 3).²¹

Finally, I would like to adduce five other textiles from Egypt, each of which depicts the bust of a richly bejeweled woman who may have been intended to personify Earth, but who could also have been given other identifications. The first example, also from the Louvre collection, is a panel of tapestry weave in wool and linen measuring around fourteen and a half by eleven and a half inches, the design of which is related to the textile just described.²² It shows in the center the frontal bust of a woman wearing a jeweled diadem, necklace, earrings and collar. She is inscribed in a circle containing flower buds, which is contained by a square. In each of the four spandrels there is a blue peacock, while the outer frame contains a series of sixteen medallions enclosing stylized flowers or birds. The similarity of the central figure to the personifications on the previously discussed textiles in Durham, Chicago, Cleveland and Paris (Figs. 2, 4, 6 and 8) suggests that this also may be a representation of Earth. It can be noted, in addition, that the peacock was considered by Early Christian writers one of the most beautiful adornments of terrestrial creation,²³ and as such would be a fitting sign of the Earth costumed in her finery. However, in the absence of any offerers of fruit and game, or of any motifs indicating the surrounding sea, the identification of the subject cannot be as certain as in the case of the preceding examples.

The same observation may be made of two other panels of wool and linen tapestry weave in the Louvre, each of which also shows the frontal bust of a richly costumed female in a surround containing birds and plants. In these two panels, which are closely related to each other, the woman

²¹ See also the boys offering produce to the personification of Γῆ depicted in the floor mosaic of the church of St. George at Khirbat al-Makhāyyat; Saller and Bagatti, *Town of Nebo*, pp. 67–74, fig. 8, pls. 22–28. A related tapestry is no. 42.438.4 in the Brooklyn Museum on which the bust of a woman wearing earrings and a jeweled collar or necklace, but no diadem, receives offerings in the form of vases or birds; D. Thompson, *Coptic Textiles in the Brooklyn Museum* (New York 1971), p. 72, no. 31.

²² Inventory number X4665; du Bourguet, *Catalogue des étoffes coptes*, p. 197, no. E30.

²³ See, for example, Gregory of Nazianzus, *Homilia XXVIII*, 24; George of Pisidia, *Hexæmeron*, 1245–1292 (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* XCII, cols. 1529–1532). For the association of the peacock with Juno and with empresses, see J. M. C. Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art* (London 1972), pp. 251 ff.

wears a diadem in her hair, earrings, a jeweled necklace and a jeweled collar.²⁴ Her bust is enclosed by a circle strewn with green leaves which is set in a square; here, too, each of the four spandrels contains a blue peacock. The whole composition is surrounded by a squared frame containing schematic petals.

A fourth panel from the Louvre also displays the frontal bust of a woman wearing long pendant earrings, a pearled necklace, and a jeweled collar.²⁵ Her head is surrounded by a nimbus and her portrait is framed by a squared border containing a series of medallions enclosing stylized plants. A similar panel of tapestry weave is preserved in the Textile Museum of Washington, D.C. (Fig. 9).²⁶ It is about twelve and a half inches in height and ten inches wide, and it shows in the center a circle containing the bust of a woman wearing a jeweled diadem in her hair, long pendant earrings, and a jeweled collar. Behind her head there is a yellow nimbus. The circle containing the bust is enclosed in a rectangular frame filled along its sides with stylized rinceaux and at its four corners with schematized flowers.

Each of these last five examples may well represent the personification of Earth surrounded by her plants and creatures. However, as so often happens in Egyptian textiles, the iconography has become simplified to the point that a specific identification of the subject is no longer possible; indeed, the images are ambiguous. Besides Earth, the woman in this last group of textiles could also have represented other personifications who were commonly shown during Late Antiquity as frontal figures in rich attire. Such personifications would include Ἑστία πολύολβος ("the Hearth, rich in blessings"), as seen on the famous tapestry in Dumbarton Oaks,²⁷ and Τύχη καλή ("Good Fortune"), as seen on certain clay lamps from Egypt (Fig. 10). In each of these cases, of course, the meanings overlap with the concept of the fruitful Earth, beautiful and rich in her blessings. The lack of specificity of the iconography on the textiles could have had multiple causes. On the one hand, the abstraction of the motif can be attributed to the repeated copying of a more detailed model by weavers who no longer understood its original context. But, on the other hand, the generalization of the image of the richly dressed woman can also be seen as an intensification of its significance, for the beneficent associations of *all* the wealth-bringing female personifications it resembled could now be read into it.

In conclusion, a few observations can be made concerning the relevance of these domestic textiles to the wider study of early Byzantine art. We have seen how floor mosaics can help us to interpret the subjects on weavings.

²⁴ Inventory numbers X4156 and X4157; *L'Art Copte*, exhibition catalogue, Petit Palais (Paris 1964), p. 211, no. 252; du Bourguet, *Catalogue des étoffes*, p. 332, nos. F228 and F229. The dimensions are ten and a half by nine inches and ten and a quarter by ten and a half inches.

²⁵ Inventory number X4727; *L'Art Copte*, p. 209, no. 251; du Bourguet, p. 331, no. F227. The dimensions are ten and a half by eleven and a half inches.

²⁶ Museum accession number 72.121. Trilling, *The Roman Heritage*, p. 33, no. 7, plate 4.

²⁷ P. Friedländer, *Documents of Dying Paganism* (Berkeley 1945), pp. 1-26.

But just as ecclesiastical mosaics can throw light upon the meanings of motifs on household cloths, so also the textiles can help us to understand how contemporary viewers may have reacted to the decorations of churches. Many of the floor mosaics which portrayed the earth together with her creatures and products were capable of several levels of interpretation. From the perspective of the clergy, who were often the patrons and who may sometimes have participated in the designing of the floors, the mosaics conveyed ideas about the nature of God's terrestrial creation and about the place of humanity within it, ideas which were expressed also in Early Christian sermons and commentaries on the 'Εξάήμερον.²⁸ But from the perspective of the lay churchgoers the mosaics may have contained a simpler message; they gave the promise of fruitfulness in dry climates, as did the textiles people used in their houses. Whether she was repeated as a charm on a garment or laid out on the floor of a sacred building, the personification of Earth, richly adorned and framed by water, held out the hope of plenty in arid lands.

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²⁸ Henry Maguire, *Earth and Ocean: the Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art*, Monographs on the Fine Arts sponsored by the College Art Association of America 43 (University Park 1987), pp. 69-72.

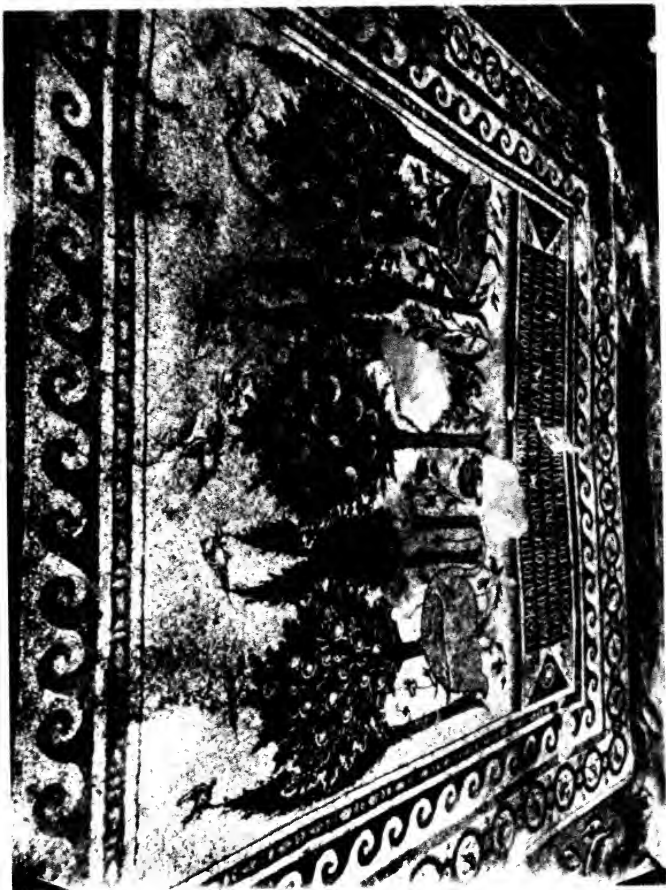


Figure 1. Floor Mosaic, Basilica of Dumetios, Nikopolis, north transept. Earth and Ocean.
(Photo: Archaeological Society, Athens)

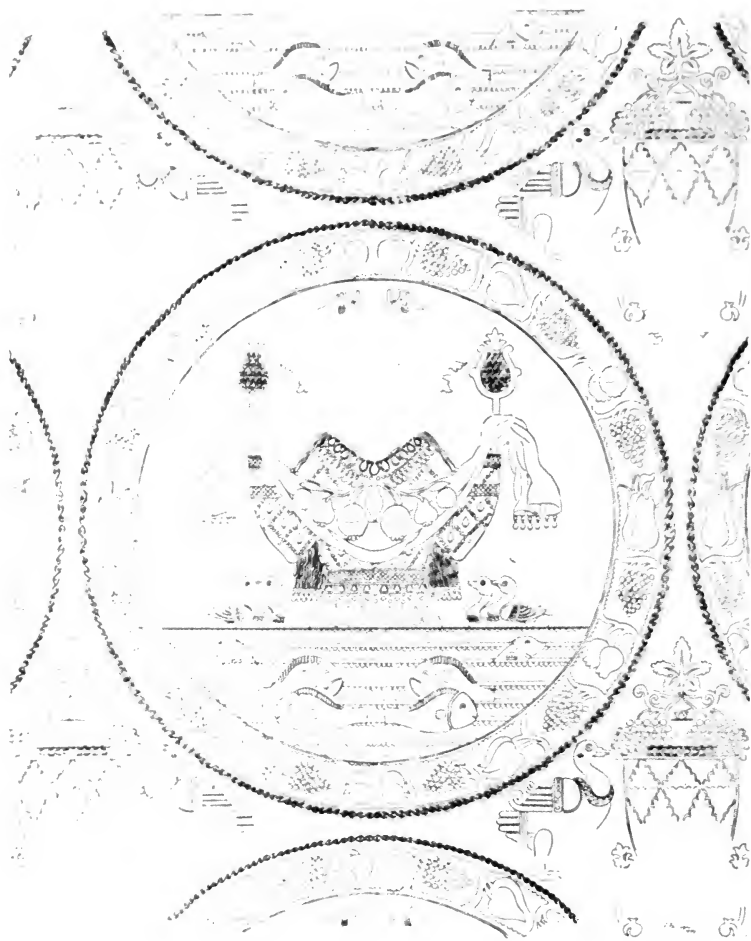


Figure 2. Silk from St. Cuthbert's coffin, Durham Cathedral, reconstructed detail. Earth and Ocean. (Photo from J. F. Flanagan, "The figured Silks," in *The Relics of St. Cuthbert*, ed. C. F. Battiscombe [Oxford 1956], fig. 1)



Figure 3. Floor Mosaic, Church of the Priest John, Khirbat al-Makhāyyat, nave, detail. Earth and offerings.
(Photo: Terrasanta)



Figure 4. Tapestry weave, Field Museum, Chicago. Earth and Ocean.
(Photo: Courtesy, Field Museum of Natural History)

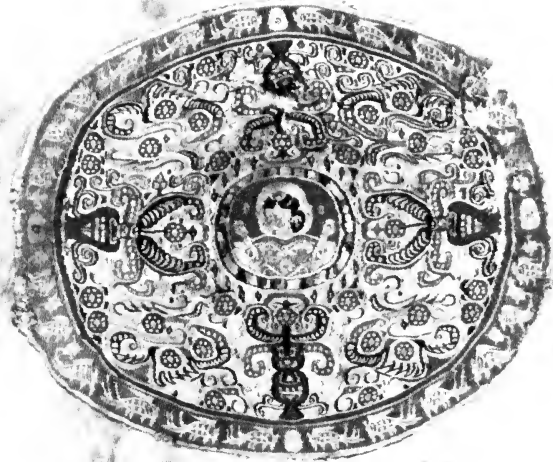


Figure 5. Tapestry weave, Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Earth and Ocean.
(Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

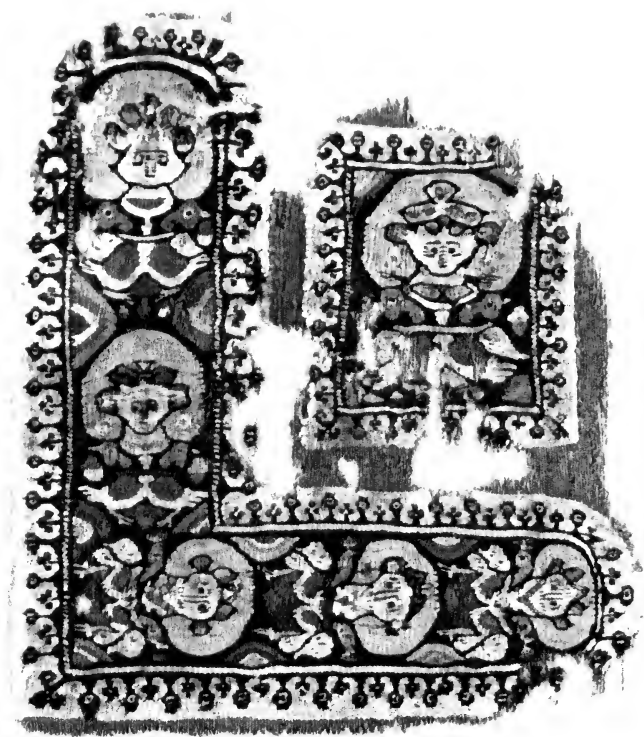


Figure 6. Tapestry weave, Cleveland Museum of Art. Earth and Ocean. (Photo: Cleveland Museum of Art; purchase A. W. Ellenburger Sr. Endowment Fund)



Figure 7. Tapestry weave, Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Earth. (Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



Figure 8. Tapestry weave, Louvre, Paris. Earth and offerings.
(Photo: Musées Nationaux, Paris)



Figure 9. Tapestry weave, Textile Museum, Washington, D. C. Earth?
(Photo: The Textile Museum)

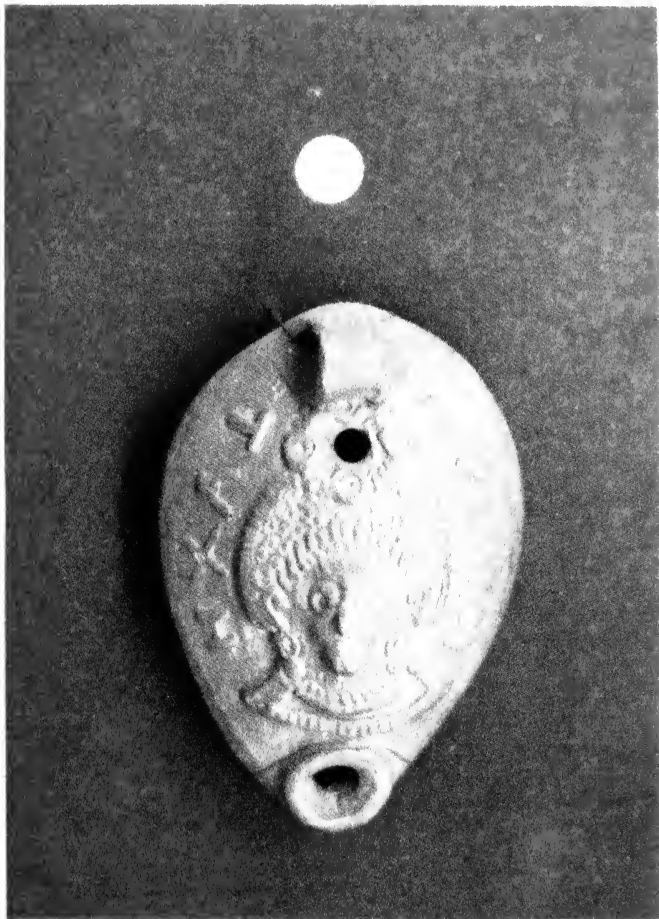


Figure 10. Clay Lamp from Egypt, Bode Museum, Berlin, Frühchristlich-Byzantinische Sammlung. Τύχη καλή. (Photo: author)